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ABSTRACT

Recent developments in the social policy literature suggest a growing overlap in community and social policy interests and methods. This combination of community and policy interests is illustrated by tracing successive steps of the Illinois Residential Life Survey in order to support programming decisions about community mental health in a college environment. Specifically, data about the influence of the social environment on alcohol consumption were needed. The Illinois Residential Life Survey was administered to approximately 3,000 students in 130 residence hall floors, fraternities, and sororities. The cost of the research, and its benefits for planning interventions are enumerated. The survey was useful in identifying meaningful dimensions which differentiate living groups by their beliefs about alcohol consumption, characteristic drinking styles, and labelling of deviant drinking. These dimensions are related to social climate, and are not simply distinctions between males and females or residence halls and Greek houses. (BW)

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COSTS AND BENEFITS OF POLICY-ORIENTED COMMUNITY RESEARCH: A CASE STUDY

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Community psychologists have long faced the challenge of doing research to build empirically grounded theory and develop commurity interventions. Should a community psychologist add to these challenges by directing research to social policy questions? We will note recent developments in the social policy literature which suggest a growing overlap in community and social policy interests and methods. This overlap clarifies the focus of community research on social systems. We will illustrate the combination of commu.'ty and policy interests by tracing sucessive steps of the Illinois Residential Life Survey. In so doing, we also hope to provide some practical guidance on mobilizing resources towards such research.

Goodstein and Sandler (1978) distinguish community psychology and public policy psychology. The public policy psychologist works with government policymakers, functions as an expert and technician, participates in the politics of policy-making, and draws upon special knowledge of policy formulation and implementation, as well as relevant resaerch areas. The emphasis here on technical advice concerning formal decisions by the government is in keeping with Cohen and Garet's (1975) discussion of public policy and the social sciences. However, we can consider social policy to be a larger field that encompasses public policy, but also includes other options. First, social policy includes more than formal decisions made at the state and local level. Local decision-making bodies and private groups make important social policy decisions (Weir, 1980, 1981). Second, social policy includes more than technical information and evaluation of the effects of particular policy options. Social policy can include shared beliefs about the nature of a social problem and possible solutions (Cohen and Garet, 1975). Third, social policy need not focus on information for top administrators, legislators, and judges. Several writers have emphasized the importance of "giving psychology away" (Miller, 1969), informing ordinary knowledge about social issues (Lindblom and Cohen, 1979; Caplan, 1979), or

providing evaluation results to the public (Cronbach, 1983). Major contributions to policy often consist of information that redefines a problem in a useful way, rather than making specific recommendations that follow from a flawed definition of the problem (Caplan, 1979; Weiss, 1978; Weiss and Weiss, 1981). In short, a psychologist's role in social policy is considerably broader than Goodstein and Sandler's (1978) concept of a public policy psychologist. Community psychology and social policy overlap at the point where we focus on local and private decision-making bodies, help to redefine local problems, expand awareness of alternate solutions, and use research-based information to increase local resources for making decisions.

In this broad sense, social policy directly affects community intervention. Social policy can be described by rules and regularities which constrain the behavior of a social system. For example, landlord-tenant exchanges are governed, in part, by local housing laws. It is often necessary to change local policy to effect lasting change. For example, most tenants' unions concern themselves with changing local laws when existing laws prevent effective advocacy. Social policy as common knowledge about the nature and solution of a problem has subtler, but equally important, consequences. Rappaport (1977) argues that many social problems are defined in a way that prevents the discovery of an effective solution. A wide variety of behaviors are defined in terms of individual malfunctioning (Ryan, 1971; Caplan and Nelson, 1973). Given this definition, one might not even look for solutions which alter environmental conditioons or increase person-environment fit (Rappaport, 1977).

Goodstein and Sandler's (1978) distinction between community psychology and public policy psychology is useful for noting contrasts between these roles. However, a broader concept of social policy links these two roles, and includes many activities that are already familiar to community psychology (e.g. changing

local policy, redefining problems and expanding available solutions in a local context). The main advantage of directing community research towards social policy is conceptual: our attention is focused on the rules and assumptions that govern the behavior of a social system. In this frame of mind, we are less likely to restrict our research and intervention to the more familiar domain of community mental health (Goodstein and Sandler, 1978).

We are still not sure how much an emphasis on social policy involves a direct transfer of skills from community psychology, and how much this interest requires new methods and skills. So far, we have relied on the same set of skills we have used in other community interventions and research projects. Pragmatically, an infinitely wider gap exists between the role of academic research psychologist on the one hand, and the role of action research with community/policy interests. We will now discuss our own experiences with balancing academic and action research roles in an ongoing project.

Our interests lie in enhancing residential living groups as a context for development. The transition from home to the world of work is an important milestone in adult development. The college environment can aid or inhibit accomplishment of developmental tasks (Bloom, 1971, 1977; Chickering, 1969; Moos, 1978). Efforts to prevent maladaptation and enhance development during this period typically focus on individual students. However, many concepts and models in community mental health have been developed in the context of college services: peer counseling, milestone prevention, and a variety of outreach activities. What we seem to lack is workable knowledge about the social ecology of student development that can be used in decisions made by administrators, university staff, and student groups. Moos (1978) concludes Evaluating Educational Environments by stating that staff and students are

"correct in assuming that their choices and policies matter and that the educational settings they select and create have varied impacts. We need to pursue the search for viable conceptual frameworks to help us comprehend these basic realities" (Moos, 1978, p. 273). He reports evidence that social environments influence coping styles, personal interests and values, alcohol consumption, health, and academic behavior. From this perspective, we were took a fresh look at many familiar research areas in order to identify points where the residential environment could be modified.

First, information clarifying the role of environmental influences on the formation of social networks is needed. One can think of a social network as an individual's "personal community" (Hirsch, 1981) which forms the context for understanding coping and role transitions. However, social networks are formed in a wider context including work, residence, leisure, and voluntary organizations. We sought information on the interplay between these larger systems and social networks. We hope this perspective will indicate ways that residence halls can facilitate the formation of networks and the provision of support. Earlier work has identified influences from architecture (Holohan and Wilcox, 1977, 1978) and social climate (Moos, 1978). We hope to extend these results.

Second, there is strong evidence that social climate can affect alcohol consumption (Moos, 1978). However, intervention requires more information on more specific aspects of the social environment which influence consumption. We also suspected that the relationship between consumption and other aspects of functioning (grades, satisfaction, social participation) might be mediated by characterististics of the living group. On both of these points, we needed to assess living group beliefs about alcohol use and characteristic drinking styles (e.g. drinking to get drunk). This information will be useful in local programming, but we also believe it can be used in decisions affecting residential climate.

Third, we needed to identify characteristics of living groups where residents provided help to fellow residents with alcohol-related problems. A useful first step would encompass living group variation in definitions of drinking problems, perceptions of responsibility and ability to help, and actual frequency of helping.

Finally, we needed to identify coping styles among abstinent students in heavy-drinking residences, children of alcoholics, and other "environmental resistors". This information was sought by health professionals involved in substance abuse services. However, coping styles are also important for understanding how individuals actively seek and create social environments to maintain behavior which is more congruent with their needs and values. We need to identify the social resources these students draw upon when they diverge from behavior patterns of their residence and family.

The Illinois Residential Life Survey followed from an alliance of these interests with those of our co-investigators, Professor Joseph McGrath and Rick Schrager, who are currently examining the impact of residential social climate on academic achievement. The survey packet included Moos' (1978) University Residence Environment Scale, and measures of group beliefs about alcohol, drinking style, consumption, labelling of deviant drinking, comparison of drinking to key referents, satisfaction, selected social network variables, and demographic information. Aproximately 3,000 students in 130 residence hall floors, fraternities, and sororities completed the survey. The data-bank also includes objective archival information on precollege academic characteristics, current academic performance, and some basic architectural information for residence halls. While it may seem that we sampled many residents, our basic interests required a large sample of living groups (N=130). Questions on a large-scale survey must be limited, so for more extensive information on stress, social networks, individual differences, and outcome measures we turned to a

smaller sample of 150 students. Our decision to pursue community and policy interests in this study implied many points of divergence from academic roles. We shall review the costs first, and then turn to the benefits.

When we speak of costs, we are speaking of time and energy we invested in activities beyond the conventional role of an academic research psychologist. These might be seen as an unwelcome burden in an academic setting. However, we feel these activities are essential for intervention, and are also useful for guiding basic research. In this sense, the costs of the project were:

Attention to utilization at the earliest stages of conceptualization and research design. We did not feel it would be enough to leave behind a finished research report with a closing paragraph on policy implications. Even an earnest attempt to apply findings after we had completed the project seemed insufficient. Rather, we had to build utilization into the project at the very start so this consideration could shape subsequent research decisions. Weir (1981) notes that usable research can be either basic or applied, so long as findings are relevant to informing policy. We had both basic and applied interests in mind. Basic research on the influences of residential living groups seemed relevant to many potential users who had a sense that such influences were important, and who needed a clear model for thinking about them. This use of the research corresponds to Caplan's (1979) "conceptual use" of findings. That is, a good theory about living group influences might not yield specific recommendations, but it might aid in defining problems, seeing an expanded set of solutions, identifying issues, and organizing observations. We also had applied interests, which lead to a second "cost".

Early attention to multiple applied goals. Relevant basic research is useful, but we were aware that analysis and interpretation would take a considerable amount of time. Many other applied uses can be met, particularly when they are identified in the early stages of research design. Data on children of alcoholics

was sought by health care professionals. This interest was met with only minor modifications in the survey, but would have been missed altogether had we not spoken with a wide audience of potential users. We provided feedback to partcipating living groups following guidelines for confidentiality and consultation found in Moos (1979). We have reported early findings to a wide variety of administrators and student service personnel. We also know that the databank can be used to answer a wide variety of questions which lie outside of our immediate field of interest. Our ultimate objective lies in identifying ways to improve the developmental impact of residential environemnts. However, we felt it was important to incorporate many other interests and uses which could be adressed soon after data were gathered.

Share ownership with potential users. We involved a wide range of offices in early stages of this project. It is seldom possible for one office in an inter-related system to make full use of research findings. If several different groups impact on student development, then the survey must at least gain wide approval. More importantly, potential users must feel that their interests are represented in design and analysis. This means that the investigator must genuinely accomodate diverse points of view, rather than acting as a detached, autonomous expert. There were certain interests we could not accomodate. We did not include questions concerning violations of state law or university regulations about drinking. We could not be seen as policemen, for this would provoke defensiveness and detract from the value of the survey. This expalnation satisfied all concerned parties.

The alcohol questions posed a more difficult situation. There was considerable interest in adding questions on individual consumption patterns and symptoms. However, we could not add these questions as they would have increased the length of the survey and provoked defensive answers to questions on the ecology of drinking. We felt that the ecological approach required

a large-scale survey to sample enough living groups, and that a study of individual symptomatology could be accomplished with a brief survey involving a smaller sample. We ultimately conducted a smaller survey on these aspects of alcohol abuse as a followup to the Illinois Residential Life Survey.

Thus, shared ownership was pursued up to the point where accomodating some interests was incompatable with the overall goals of the survey. Where we felt a pull away from studying ecology, we felt that resisting this pressure was necessary not only for our own research interests, but also for the usablility of the study. Divergence from viewing alcohol use as an issue of social control or individual symptomataology was, we felt, a major potential contribution of the study.

Active Dissemination and Consultation. We can use the results of this study to guide our own intervention activities. However, there is a limit to what we can accomplish, and what the findings can inform, if we do not actively transmit information to a wider network of administrators, student service professionals, and student groups. It is extremely unlikely that these groups will use findings from the project unless we relate results to their activities and interests. If this wider network is not involved, then our own actvities will take place in isolation from other systems that affect residential life. In short, our interventions will not be enhanced by a wider climate of interest in the environemntal context of student development.

We will now speak of the benefits that followed from the approach outlined above, which we think more than justify the time and energy involved.

Funds and legitimacy. No one campus office could fund this project or completely support our identity as legitimate investigators in so many living groups. The pooled resources of all of the offices we involved amounted to a small grant from N.I.M.H., to which we could add resources for research that were not available to university staff.

University offices played an equally important role in supporting our identity as legitimate investigators involved in potentially useful research. For example, we expected to encounter some scepticism from residence hall staff who are frequently approached for access to a captive "subject pool". We had were able to be very specific about potential uses of the research, including feedback reports. We also had the full backing of the central Housing Division office. This support helped to establish our credibility as applied researchers.

Mobilization. In the residence halls, we needed active aid from floor staff and students. We were not operating in a context where approval by a central office would guarantee results. While we could communicate the purpose of the project ourselves, we needed more direct personal contact. We matched research assistants to particular halls so they could gain familiarity with local staff and circumstances. We encouraged them to take the initiative in assessing which form of survey administration was best suited to local conditions. They were able to transmit the value of this work more personally, and to make this claim more credible by their flexibility. We thus received an unexpectedly high return rate from many residence halls.

Cognitive Guidance. Our ongoing involvement with many different campus groups contributed to the design of survey instruments. We were able to draw upon a wide range of accumulated experience with several aspects of student life. In analyzing data and disseminating results, we also hope to draw upon staff and students as participant conceptualizers.

Contributions to basic research. Attention to community needs and policy implications imposes a healthy discipline on research. Continued interaction with potential users and our own applications of findings (e.g. feedback) provide further "reality testing". We would suggest that the "costs" of going beyond conventional academic research were not distractions from the end of basic resaerch. Rather, our applied interests provided important feedback for our basic research interests.

Initial results from this project provide some support for our assessment of costs and benefits. We have been able to identify meaningful dimensions which differentiate living groups by their beliefs about alcohol consumption, characteristic drinking styles, and labelling of deviant drinking. These dimensions are related to aspects of social climate, and are not simply distinctions between males and females or residence halls floors and greek houses. The next step in our research will be a more thorugh assessment of the psychometric properties of these scales. We have also found a theoretically appealing factor solution for the University Residence Environment Scale.

Our major applied activities have focused on feedback of results from the University Residence Environment Scale, and reports to campus groups involved with student alcohol abuse. U.R.E.S. feedback was well received, not only for the information it contained but also because feedback indicated that results would be forthcoming from this and other projects. We expect that application of findings from the Illinois Residential Life Study will involve a series of small steps set in the context of a continuing relationship between research and use. The steps we have described above work towards such a relationship.

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